

**Government of the District of Columbia**



**Child and Family Services Agency**

Testimony of  
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Acting Director/Director Nominee

***“Confirmation Hearing”***

Committee on Human Services  
Tommy Wells, Chair  
Council of the District of Columbia

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Council Chamber  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
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Good afternoon, Chairman Wells and members of the District Council Committee on Human Services. I am Sharlynn Bobo, Acting Director of the DC Child and Family Services Agency. I am pleased to come before you today as Mayor Fenty's nominee for the position of permanent director of CFSA. If confirmed, I am committed to providing forward-thinking, honest, and sustained leadership for CFSA, in partnership with our sister agencies, providers, birth and foster families and youth, the Collaboratives, advocates, the judicial system and members of this committee and the rest of the City Council.

I am a native Washingtonian who purposefully chose a career of service to this community. In the early 1970's I lived in Los Angeles, where my daughter was born. I had decided to become an elementary school teacher, and enrolled in a Master's program at UCLA. I did my first student teaching in a school of children from very well-to-do families who, at that time, had not previously encountered an African American in a professional role. My second internship took place in a school on the opposite end of the socioeconomic scale. There I taught black children who came to school with multiple barriers to learning. The juxtaposition of those two experiences shaped my ultimate career decision: I realized that my life work would be helping the families of children like those at my second school, many of whom were so burdened that they weren't available for learning. It was then that I decided to become a social worker rather than a teacher. I decided to return to Washington and enrolled at the Howard University School of Social Work, from which I've earned both masters and doctoral degrees. My experiences as a social worker, human services manager, and executive in both the private and public sectors have deepened my understanding of the complex social issues many District residents face. I am dedicated to ensuring that the abused and neglected children of this community and their troubled families have opportunities to heal and to thrive.

In my testimony today, I will outline my vision for leading CFSA, beginning with a look back at how far we've come as an agency that works in the best interests of children. Since leaving Federal receivership and returning to city control as a cabinet-level agency in 2001, District child welfare has transformed from what U.S. District Judge Thomas Hogan once characterized as a system "in a shambles" into a city-wide safety net for abused and neglected children and troubled families. What we commonly speak of as "child welfare **reform**" was, in this city,

really “child welfare **construction.**” I joined CFSA in 2002, as a member of the first group of top managers assembled as the District’s child welfare turnaround team. While we were challenged to meet the rigors of the court-ordered five year blueprint, we were inspired by the opportunity to create a highly functioning system that could actually work for the children of the District who are in such great need. We had an opportunity in the District to implement new and innovative programs consistent with best practices in child welfare from around the world. Thus, over the past five years, I have witnessed and played an active role in helping achieve the many measurable improvements CFSA has made.

In 2001, a most urgent requirement of the court-order involved assembling the infrastructure of a new cabinet-level agency. The following achievements from the time we established the agency stand out:

- Tangible support from the Mayor and District Council enabled CFSA to hire an adequate staff of licensed social workers, to provide comprehensive training and supervision, and to invest in a broad array of resources that directly support quality service to children and families.
- CFSA successfully forged equitable working partnerships with a range of local child-serving public and private organizations, resulting in construction of the first viable, citywide child welfare safety net.
- Collection, analysis, and sharing of significant performance and other information have made CFSA both data-driven and highly transparent in equal measure. Continuous external and internal oversight of CFSA—and CFSA oversight of contracted providers—are now standard procedure, along with dissemination of and management decision-making based on findings.

Also in 2001, the LaShawn court order required the District to make numerous measurable improvements in local child welfare practice. Chief among our many successes in delivering quality service are the following.

- In 2001, the District did not have an accurate count of the number of children and youth in the local child welfare system. Furthermore, in May 2001, the Court Monitor found that only 3% of children in foster care received a monthly visit from their social worker. Today, CFSA knows not only the location and a vast array of other critical data about every child, teen, and family we're serving—but social workers also visit more than three-quarters of clients, whether at home or in out-of-home care, twice each month.
- In sharp contrast to the past when local child welfare did little more than respond to constant crises, CFSA now routinely uses several evidence-based and promising practices. The ongoing internal process of identifying, introducing, and evaluating local effectiveness of cutting-edge methods of serving child welfare clients is firmly established. Among these practices are Family Team Meetings that give parents and extended family members a voice in how best to keep children safe; multisystemic therapy (MST), multidimensional treatment foster care (MTFC), the Mockingbird model of foster family support, and a positive youth development approach to serving teens.
- Finally, CFSA has planted the seeds of a child welfare practice not driven solely by compliance with outside mandates but also by our moral obligation to the citizens of this community and our shared values as human services professionals.

It's nearly impossible to overstate the high degree of professionalism; hard work; tolerance for constant, rapid change; and sheer perseverance that CFSA staff has exerted to attain these notable strategic improvements. My three predecessors each brought considerable skill and ability to the challenges of her tenure, and left a legacy of significant, meaningful progress. I intend to build upon those accomplishments and to use the leadership opportunity afforded me to stimulate high quality practice that our children and families deserve.

Exit from Federal court oversight also remains a critical goal. December 31, 2008 marks the date by which the District is expected to fully meet the requirements in the *LaShawn* Amended Implementation Plan. We have been working very hard to meet those requirements and have

made notable progress, as described here today by our Court Monitor. My assessment is that, with a concerted effort, CFSA is on track to achieve compliance with enough of the mandated performance benchmarks to request final exit from court oversight at the end of 2008, and to complete an anticipate probationary period during which we would demonstrate that we can sustain that performance. With assistance from the other stakeholders of the District child welfare system, I am committed to doing everything I can as the Director of CFSA to ensure that we meet these goals.

I would like to focus my testimony now on five themes that I believe are critical to continuing child welfare progress in achieving positive outcomes for more children, youth, and families more of the time.

- The first theme is **practice**. Court-ordered implementation plans and other outside mandates provide sound blueprints for child welfare reform, but even full compliance with these mandates does not automatically translate into quality practice. Good child welfare practice comes from a deep personal commitment to help combined with the clinical training and skills to do so—especially in view of the multiple, complex issues so many of our clients face today. Within CFSA, I have launched initiatives that build on our values-based Practice Model and Quality Service Reviews to emphasize the larger principles that underlie child welfare work. This includes strengthening the critical gateway to the public child protection system by ensuring that Child Protective Services investigations are both timely and thorough. We are also partnering with the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives to serve families from a strengths-based, outcome-focused perspective when children can safely remain at home with regular monitoring. This values-based, rich, and meaningful organizational development is essential to sustain high levels of performance in child welfare over time.
- The second theme is **permanence**. Safety, permanence, and well being are the three basic tenets of child welfare, and CFSA has made enormous progress in providing these essentials to those we serve. But because instability is extremely harmful to young people of all ages, we must bring an even greater sense of urgency to achieving permanence for

every child and teen as quickly as possible. We are holding Family Team Meetings when children are removed or are at-risk of removal, and an independent evaluation has shown that children who have an FTM return home more quickly. In fact, family reunification is now the leading pathway to permanence for our children and youth.

With the use of guardianship subsidies funded with local dollars, we have also vastly increased legal guardianships as a pathway to permanence. Our next step is to significantly increase placement of children with their relatives. Toward that end, I am very pleased to report that we anticipate soon being able to promptly place children with their kin in Maryland, as we routinely do in the District. We have also recently implemented a practice change designed to sharpen our focus on and expedite permanence: a Permanency Planning Social Worker is now teamed with each unit of out-of-home care social workers to facilitate concurrent planning for children and youth. No longer are cases being transferred to a specialized worker when a child's permanency goal becomes adoption. We are also implementing new techniques to locate and connect youth with extended family members who will remain in their lives as life-long connections. Further, we intend to emphasize increased permanency rates in our performance-based contracts with family-based foster care providers. Finally, to ensure that families providing permanent homes for children and youth remain strong and stable, we have established a unit of social workers who specialize in post-permanency services and have recently awarded an enhanced contract for a community-based Post-Permanency Support Center that serves both adoptive and guardianship families.

- The third theme is **performance**, which means not merely hitting percentage targets but rather achieving more positive outcomes for more children, youth, and families. It also emphasizes consistency, quality, and accountability among all child-serving agencies, both public and private. We intend to hold both CFSA and its contracted partners accountable for improving permanence, safety, and well-being outcomes for children and families using national standards as our guide. Performance-based contracting—based on clear expectations and coupled with the use of objective monitoring standards and tools, consistent contract administration, and use of fiscal incentives and disincentives to

achieve desired outcomes—will be a critical strategy in our efforts. Through expanded use of Quality Service Reviews, implementation of a case review approach modeled on New York’s ChildStat, and other best practices, we will intensify our performance on behalf of children and families.

- The fourth theme is **prevention**. For decades, Federal child welfare funding has emphasized response to child abuse and neglect. Forty years ago, in the early days of Federal foster care funding, that emphasis made sense. It continues to make sense whenever social issues overwhelm child welfare systems, as cocaine did in urban areas in the 1990s and as methamphetamines are doing in rural America today. But when a system experiences several years of a declining out-of-home care caseload, as is true in the District, then it’s time to invest in front-end, evidence-based services in areas of the community with the highest incidence of abuse and neglect. At this point, I want to share a fact not well-known to the public: the number of children we serve in their own homes continues to grow steadily. In September, for example, 47% of CFSA’s caseload, or 1,996 children, were served at home with their birth families. Fewer and fewer children are entering foster care. Thus, over the next few years, we will continue to support development of a strong system of services and supports to strengthen families and contribute to preventing children’s entry or re-entry into foster care. These will include intensive home- and community-based services, including respite care. Established community-based service delivery systems, such as the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives, have provided a solid local foundation for expanded prevention efforts and will continue to serve as our primary partner in prevention. Other examples of programs we have funded include the Healthy Start program of home visits to young mothers shortly after they give birth and the Parent-Teen Conflict Resolution and Respite Care program, operated by Sasha Bruce Youthworks, which serves families with youth ages 13 to 21.
- The fifth, and final, theme is **partnership**. Child welfare is not an agency—it’s a system, and serving children is not just CFSA’s job—it’s everyone’s job. The strength of the local safety net depends on the cooperation, coordination, quality work, high

performance, and accountability of a host of public agencies, private providers, community-based organizations, legislators and other oversight authorities, mandated reporters, foster parents, community members, and advocates. All these key players contributed to positive preliminary results on the District's second Federal Child and Family Services Review this past summer. In recent months, we have made significant progress in working with others around a number of pressing issues. Here are some significant examples of those partnerships.

- CFSA is collaborating with the DC Department of Mental Health to build a mental health system that will meet the unique needs of abused and neglected children.
- We are working with the Family Court and the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services to determine how best to serve youth involved in the juvenile justice system and lacking responsible adult support, as well as those already involved with both the child welfare and delinquency systems.
- As I mentioned previously, we are making critical progress in negotiations with the State of Maryland to create more flexible arrangements for implementing the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children for District children placed in that state.
- Foster parents and the District Public Schools are members of CFSA's team working to improve educational outcomes for children in foster care through a Breakthrough Series funded by Casey Family Programs.
- This year, the Consortium for Child Welfare, with the assistance from the Howard University School of Social Work, will conduct research to help us understand why an increasing number of youth are entering foster care at an older age. We have also nearly completed plans for a training program with Howard, the Catholic University School of Social Work, and the University of the District of Columbia to prepare social work students for employment in child welfare.
- We have collaborated with the Young Women's Project to develop a Mandatory Allowance for youth residing in group homes and will implement it this fiscal year.



- Finally, I could not let this opportunity pass without mentioning our progress toward accomplishing one of the most promising examples of partnership in the history of the agency: collaboration on development of a Community-based Practice Model that will result in CFSA and Collaborative staff working together with families served in their homes. With the support of AFCSME, we hope to co-locate CFSA's in-home staff in the community with the Collaboratives, beginning in early 2008.

This is an ambitious, and perhaps high-minded, agenda—as it should be. The most vulnerable children, youth, and families in our community deserve no less than our collective best. The many child welfare stakeholders who know me through our work together over the years will not be surprised that deep dedication to service is one of my most important values, one that will undergird my leadership of CFSA. I look forward to the opportunities this role offers to inspire or support it in others. I believe that my colleagues throughout this community also support my strong personal integrity and reputation for straight shooting. Those qualities come with a commitment to acknowledging, celebrating, and building on what's working and facing and fixing whatever is not. Since first being appointed Interim Director, and then, following a national search, being nominated for the position of permanent Director by Mayor Fenty, I have learned firsthand how demanding this job is. But each day I am rewarded by the opportunity to bring my capabilities and experience to bear on such a worthwhile challenge. I am especially gratified to use the leadership and organizational change expertise I've developed throughout my lengthy career.

I look forward to continuing to serve the District. I hope I can count on your continued support to reach and sustain the high level of performance we collectively owe to our city's abused and neglected children and troubled families. With support from the past and current Mayor and members of this Council, the District's child welfare system has come a very long way and is poised to continue its steady progress. Let us stand together and deliver. Thank you.